

Water Dept. is improving service, City Council told

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Efforts to turn around Cleveland's troubled Water Department and improve service are on track, city officials and consultants told City Council members Wednesday.

The first phase of the program, meant to address poor customer service and billing problems, is supposed to be done by November. The council insisted on the bureaucratic surgery before it would consider a rate increase.

The turnaround project began June 6, two weeks after the council barely approved rate increases of 82 percent for city residents and 50 percent for suburban customers to be phased in until 2015.

Paul Bender, project manager for the city, said Wednesday that customers calling the Water Department averaged a 16-minute wait in January. That dropped to 1 minute and 6 seconds by July 5, he said, and since then it has been around 30 seconds.

SEE WATER | B3

WATER

FROM B1

First phase said to be on track

City officials said Wednesday that they had heard waiting time was as long as 45 minutes before the project began. "Longer," was the dour rebuttal of Ward 11 Councilman Mike Polensek, who had opposed the rate increase.

Ward 9 Councilman Kevin Conwell said that he had constituents call the Water Department just to check on customer-service improvements, and he said the response time is as brisk as officials claim.

But he and Councilman Jeffrey Johnson both expressed concern during Wednesday's Public Utilities Committee meeting about whether the improvements would become part of the embattled Water Department's culture or would vanish when the turnaround consultants wrap up their work in November.

Mayor Frank Jackson said in a telephone interview after the hearing that a new water commissioner who will start next week is coming on board to make sure the reforms stick. The hiring of Bernardo Garcia was meant to coincide with the turnaround project, the mayor said, "so we are not dumping him into a problem with no solutions."

Officials told council members on Wednesday that other improvements include more-effective bill collection, focusing first on the larger delinquent commercial accounts that owe the city \$10,000 or more. City Finance Director Sharon Dumas said the city is owed about \$72 million for water, with \$42 million of that delinquent.

Also in progress is the Automated Meter Reading pilot program, which is supposed to assure swifter, more accurate meter readings.

Polensek and Ward 17 Councilwoman Dona Brady both expressed reservations about installing new meters on the city's aging housing stock.

Brady said her home is 110 years old and most of the homes here are at least 60 years old. Polensek said plumbers he has talked to warned him that the new meters could pose problems when their installation disturbs the city's ancient cast-iron water mains.

Black & Veatch, the Kansas-based consulting firm, is involved in only the first phase of the turnaround, but the council allowed a two-year window for extension of its contract.

Bender, the city's project manager, said Phase II will focus on the Automated Meter Reading program and billing-system improvements, which will take more than the five months envisioned for Phase I.

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